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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noekle

Studies by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service show 60% of the land surface of the state is in ranch lands. "Herders," said an association journal for the sheep and goat raiser's association reporting the study, "average out to be 57 years of age."

At a meeting at Ozona, Texas, by the same group that magazine represents, further information showed that 97% or so of the 90 million acres within state boundaries is privately owned.

So much information at one time confused the sources in my notes, but what threw me off was how the average ages had advanced. Somewhere the idea hit that the reason so many gray-temple and whiskered hombres were showing up in the trade gatherings was from wanting to look trustworthy, like airline pilots do by dyeing their hair gray to built up passenger confidence right after they graduate from pilot's school.

For certain part-time ranchers, like jugkeepers and bank directors, weren't adding extra color, but checking around the coffee houses and the auction center, speckled grays and blue roan hairlines do dominate the scene.

One of the big advantages of looking old is the amount of senior citizen discounts offered at many places. After

seeing the movie "On Golden Pond," starring Katherine Hepburn and Henry Fonda, I bought a hat just like Mr. Fonda wore in the show. The first month after wearing the hat on trips and to town, my credit card accounts showed more discounts than the coupon section of the Sunday edition of the daily paper.

Credit for the new costume became so profitable, I spot reviewed Mr. Fonda's role until I had down his style. Old companeros or grocery clerks who failed to recognize the resemblance were treated to chills that'd have made the mean stepmother in the story of Hecate and Gretel sound like she was headed for the best mother of the year award.

Such asides by gasoline grinders and bank tellers as "I bet that old grandpa has to watch his step crossing the streets," or "don't you know the celebration of Columbus's discovery of America means a lot to him," were soon overlooked.

I was so happy saving money, by the time the sheep and goat herders gathered at Ozona, their remarks about whether I looked like a movie actor didn't matter. Those guys had on new white Panama hats and high shined ostrich hide boots. Stretched to the absolute limit of the word, "polite," their reactions to the hat lacked about 10 points of reaching the levels of common decency set for street car conductors and subway hands.

The previous statement that 97% of the land in Texas is privately owned was substantiated at the meeting by amount of agencies and commissions and clubs on the loose wanting to take over the control of those lands. Hats woven in Ecuador and bird skin boots imported from Australia may need to be replaced by hobnails and steel helmets.

American Airlines revoked their 10% senior citizen discount at their last rate change, so the effective value of canvas hats may be on the way downhill...